

Christina Litwiller
Salina Mennonite Church
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Scripture: 1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1

It Depends on the Situation

I didn't wear pants until I was in high school. During my childhood I wore dresses, skirts and occasionally what I called culottes – in other places they're referred to as skorts. I can think of three reasons for this. First and foremost, was my religious and cultural tradition. When I was growing up Mennonite women didn't wear pants. The basis for this was a verse in Deuteronomy. *A woman must not wear men's clothes, and a man must not wear women's clothes. The Lord your God hates anyone who does that.*¹ Another reason was parental preference. I'm the third of four children, the only daughter, and my parents thought they had enough boys. They wanted me to dress like a girl. The third reason corresponded with the wider culture. My grade school dress code stipulated that girls could not wear pants in school. As I recall, boys were restricted from wearing jeans or tee shirts.

This all changed my sophomore year when I began attending a brand-new consolidated high school where everyone was allowed to wear jeans and even shorts. This was in the early 1970's when people were expressing their liberation in a variety of ways. (Some of you may be familiar with a song by Ray Stevens called "The Streak" which was released in 1974.) I still wore dresses to church on Sunday, but I flaunted my newfound freedom by wearing jeans everywhere else – at home, school, church youth group, and family gatherings.

At some point I began to question my clothing choice when visiting my grandparents. While my father had grudgingly accepted the practice of women wearing pants, my grandfather had not. He regarded the verse from Deuteronomy as a law from God that should not be broken. Although he never said anything to me about it, I knew he preferred for me to wear dresses. And so, at some point, I decided to refrain from wearing pants when we visited him. I made this choice to demonstrate the love and respect I had for him.

This memory from my teen-age years surfaced as I read what Paul had to say about food in 1 Corinthians 8-10.² The first Christians were Jews, who worshipped Jesus as the anointed one – the messiah promised to them – while continuing to follow Jewish laws and traditions. As the Christian community expanded, both in numbers and in geography, the new converts added diversity in nationality, ethnicity, culture, and religious practice. This diversity brought conflict and division within the church. Paul addresses some of the conflictual issues in his letter to the Christians in Corinth. In this section of the letter the issue is food.

Regulations around food consumption are important matters of faith and culture. They control *what* one eats, including personal or religious choices – kosher, halal, vegetarian, keto, paleo – as well as culturally defined understandings of what is fit or unfit to eat – insects, horse meat, gizzards. Culture also influences *how* one eats – with hands, and if so, which hand; with what utensils; with what etiquette. Additionally, there may be regulations that define *with whom*

¹ Deuteronomy 22:5, *New Century Version*

² This discussion draws from Dan Nighswander, *1 Corinthians: Believers Church Bible Commentary*, Herald Press, 2017, pp. 192-233.

one eats, at least at particular times or in particular circumstances. Regulations also define *where* eating is appropriate and *when*.

It's apparent that questions about food consumption were important in the early church. When church leaders met in Jerusalem to determine which, if any, of the regulations from the Hebrew scriptures were binding on Gentile (non-Jewish) Christians, three of the four items named had to do with eating, and the first of those was to abstain from anything sacrificed to idols.³

In Corinth, the main cause of contention concerning food was the matter of meat offered to idols. In most of the religions practiced in Corinth, it was common to offer food, most often meat, to the gods in their temples. After the offering to the god, the worshippers who had brought meat then ate it. On festive occasions, when many animals were sacrificed in honor of the gods, some of the meat was sold in the marketplace. This may have been the only time that meat was available in the markets. Some of the wealthier Christians viewed buying meat in the market or eating it in the temples or in someone's home as a benefit of their social status and essential to their continuing financial success.

For Paul, the issues related to the matter of food offered to idols are important enough that he devotes three chapters to them. He begins by outlining the basis of decision making.⁴ Paul rejects knowledge or theology in favor of love and relationships as the basis for ethical behavior. He agrees with those who argue that it doesn't matter what one eats. And yet, he thinks that what one eats *does* have ethical significance – not because the food itself is morally good or bad, but because of the social meaning attached to the food and the effect that choices about eating have on relationships. Paul is concerned about those who might understand the right to eat sacrificed meat in the temple as permission also to worship the idol to whom the temple and the food were dedicated. Paul's bottom line is that love is more important than exercising one's freedom of choice regarding what and where to eat.

Paul moves on to arguments from his personal experience.⁵ He states that he is an example of sensitivity to fellow Christians in the exercise of his freedoms. Paul reasserts his claim to be an apostle and describes some of the rights that apostles can rightly expect. But he has forfeited those rights for the sake of a more important goal: that through him people would hear the gospel and share in its blessings.

Next, Paul presents Scriptural arguments, listing biblical precedents related to idolatry.⁶ Even though most of the Christians in Corinth were Gentiles, not Jews, Paul identifies them as spiritual descendants of the Israelites whom God delivered from slavery in Egypt. Everyone is fully incorporated into the people of God. God provided their Hebrew ancestors with spiritual and material blessings. And yet, Paul writes, God wasn't pleased with most of them while they were in the wilderness. The actions that caused God's displeasure involved eating, drinking, and satisfying other hungers in ways that dishonored God rather than strengthening relationships with God and with each other.⁷

Paul then offers theological arguments.⁸ He reminds them that when they participate in the Lord's Supper, in Communion, they are declining loyalty to Christ and to the body of

³ Acts 15:22-19

⁴ 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

⁵ 1 Corinthians 9:1-27

⁶ 1 Corinthians 10:1-14

⁷ Exodus 32:3-6; Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 78:18; Exodus 15-17; Numbers 14-17;

⁸ 1 Corinthians 10:15-22

believers. If eating food sacrificed to an idol causes someone to be loyal to that god instead, then they cannot eat at the table of the Lord. They can't participate in communion. Paul reinforces his warning to flee from idolatry.

Finally, beginning in 1 Corinthians 10:23, Paul offers some practical advice.⁹ He continues to focus how a person's choices and behavior affect God's honor and relationships between believers.

Paul agrees with the Corinthian slogan about freedom: *I have the right to do anything*. But there are additional considerations. First, he says that the benefits of an action must be considered as well as whether it is permissible. Then he says they should consider whether an action is constructive or builds up. This consideration may limit what is permissible. More important than asking "Is this permitted?" is asking "Is this beneficial?" and "Does this build me up?" or, more importantly, "Does this strengthen the Christian assembly?"

Up to this point, Paul has been explaining that Christians should not eat in the temples of the gods because of the clear association with idolatry. Now Paul addresses two related but slightly different matters. Can Christians eat meat purchased in the marketplace? Should Christians avoid eating food served by unbelievers?

The primary factor the Corinthian Christians were using to answer these questions was whether or not the food had been offered to idols. Yet Paul, who in his former life was preoccupied with food purity matters, dismisses any question about meat purchased in the market, even though it had come from a temple. He suggests that all food is from God and can be eaten without moral qualm. In effect, he discards all food restrictions! For a man who was once a dogmatic Pharisee, this is shocking.

In the second case, where one may be invited to the home of a nonbeliever and offered food, Paul also dismisses any restrictions. There is, however, one circumstance that might cause Paul to change his counsel. That would be the case where someone else would draw attention to the fact that this food has been offered in sacrifice. Out of consideration for that person's conscience, Paul says, *Do not eat it*.

Paul is willing to give up any right for the sake of the gospel. So although he has no conscience against eating food from the meat market or anything that he might be served in people's homes, his overriding concern is the effect of his actions on others, whether believers or nonbelievers.

Paul ends this long discussion by offering a guiding principle for deciding about eating, drinking, and other actions: everything a Christian does should be determined by whether it gives *glory to God*. God's glory is diminished if other people are hindered by the believer's actions. What is most important is not human rights nor even obligations, but rather the glory of God.

While he knows it's not possible to please everyone on contentious matters, Paul makes it clear that his motive is not personal gain but for the good of others, that they might be saved. This is how he lives, trying to follow the example of Christ who ate with sinners, took food laws lightly, and subordinated his own freedom to the glory of God. Paul calls upon the Corinthian believers to do likewise.

Rather than giving clear "yes" or "no" answers, Paul illustrates that determining the faithful or right course of action depends on the situation. There is some flexibility in applying moral laws according to the circumstances.

⁹ 1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1

One of my first encounters with this concept of situational ethics was my decision to wear dresses when visiting my grandfather. Rather than flaunting my freedom – by doing something which I believe is acceptable to God – I decided to honor my grandfather and his beliefs.

Almost fifty years later, that decision seems rather easy. Since then my worldview has expanded and my circle of acquaintances has become more diverse. My concept of who God is and how God works has widened and deepened. My interpretation of the Bible has led me to discard some of my earlier beliefs about how a follower of Christ thinks and acts and lives.

As Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth, the right thing to do may depend on the situation. Of course, the practice of situational ethics can be misused. I'll offer a few distortions. Perhaps you can suggest some more.

- *If I do it, it's right. If you do it, it's wrong.* This is a way to justify what I do and vilify what someone else does. It's a common practice in politics, no matter the political party.
- *It's all relative. Nothing is always right or always wrong.* I'm convinced there must be some absolutes, but I find it difficult to articulate what items are on the absolutely wrong or right lists. Jesus stated that loving God with all your being and loving your neighbor as yourself are the most important right things to do. Paul stated that worshipping something in place of God is always wrong. Perhaps we start with those.
- *What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.* This could be interpreted to mean that it doesn't matter what we do when we're away from our usual circumstances. It could also mean that it doesn't matter what a person does in private as long as no one finds out about it. Both of these interpretations are misguided.
- *I'll just go with the crowd.* Just because everyone else is doing something doesn't make it right or even merely acceptable. It's possible for a group of good people to make bad choices.
- *I need to be sure I never do anything that could possibly offend someone.* This thinking leads to inaction because it's impossible to always please everyone and never offend anyone. There are also situations in which pleasing one group of people excludes another group of people from affirming their God-given identities and participating fully in the church. This has happened due to race, gender, and sexual orientation, to name a few.

In most situations, Paul's words to the Corinthians help us realize that freedom and joy come from serving others rather than from exclusively working on attaining and protecting one's rights. When deciding what to do in a given situation, it's important to go beyond asking what is permitted. Ask these questions instead: Is this beneficial? Does this build me up? Does this build up other people? Does this build up the faith community? When freely offered – not when demanded – focusing on others' well-being a bit more than on one's own can enhance churches, marriages, friendships, work and school environments, and even politics.

May it be so. Glory be to God.